

THE GRIM GAME HOUDINI

“What struck both of us was that there were huge gaps in Houdini’s life story and some puzzling inconsistencies. So we embarked on a journey to discover the real man. Early on, we discovered an important connection that most biographers seemed to miss.” From the Introduction to The Secret Life of Houdini, by William Kalush and Larry Sloman

THERE IS CONSIDERABLE DEBATE OVER THE QUESTION OF WHETHER HARRY Houdini ever lived in the Laurel Canyon home known locally as the ‘Houdini House.’ Even if Houdini did live in the home that now lies in ruins, his story would seem to have little relevance here. After all, Houdini, widely considered to be the consummate entertainer of his era, reached the peak of his career long before there was a Laurel Canyon—before there was even that magical place known as Hollywood. But perhaps there is still something to gain through an examination of the life of the famed magician.

What are generally claimed to be the basic details of Harry Houdini’s life can be found in several published biographies. Born Erik Weisz in Budapest, Hungary, on March 24, 1874, he was the fourth of seven children born to Rabbi Mayer Samuel Weisz and the former Cecelia Steiner. The family later changed the spelling of their names and Houdini became Ehrich Weiss, known by friends and family as “Ehrie,” which ultimately became “Harry.” His stage surname was an homage to famed

French magician Robert Houdin.

In mid-1878, Rabbi Mayer, with his five sons and pregnant wife in tow, set sail for America, arriving on July 3, 1878. The family first put down roots in Appleton, Wisconsin, before later moving, in 1887, to New York City. Four years later, Houdini launched his career as a magician, at first performing basic card tricks. He had little success and at times would make ends meet by performing in freak shows. In 1893, he met singer/dancer Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner, known as “Bess,” who would become both his wife and lifetime stage assistant. The pair though, performing as “The Houdinis,” continued to find success an elusive goal.

To say that Houdini’s fortunes changed in 1899 would be a bit of an understatement. As recounted by Kalush and Sloman, “Within months, he had gone from cheap beer halls and dime museums to the big-time—vaudeville. In one year’s time, he had gone from literally eating rabbits for survival to making what today would equal \$45,000 a week.” After finally hitting it big, however, Houdini then did something rather inexplicable—he abruptly sailed off to England to begin a lengthy European tour. Kalush and Sloman pose the obvious question: “Why would someone who had finally made it big risk everything and leave behind lucrative contracts to go to England with no real prospects in sight?” Why indeed? Such a move in those days would normally be an act of career suicide, but things worked out a little differently for Houdini; everywhere he went—first in England and then in Scotland, Holland, Germany, France and Russia—he was lauded by the press and quickly catapulted into the national limelight.

After a four-year absence, Houdini returned to the US in 1904 and resumed his lucrative career. For many years he was the highest-paid performer on the vaudeville circuit and would frequently perform to huge crowds in stunts that were sometimes arranged with corporate sponsors to promote their business. In 1912, he introduced what would become his most famed escape act, the Chinese Water Torture Cell.

In 1918, Houdini decided to try his luck with the fledgling new entertainment medium known as motion pictures, starring first in a multi-part serial and then in *The Grim Game* (1919) and *Terror Island* (1920). It was during this time that he is said to have taken up residence in Laurel Canyon, at the corner of Laurel Canyon Boulevard and Lookout Mountain Avenue. Following that, he moved to New York and started up his

own production company, the Houdini Picture Corporation, which released *The Man From Beyond* (1921) and *Haldane of the Secret Service* (1923), after which Houdini gave up his less-than-successful film career.

For the last few years leading up to his death on October 31, 1926, Houdini primarily focused on debunking psychics and mediums, leading some to speculate that the spiritualist movement may have been behind his untimely demise. To this day, séances are regularly held around the world in attempts to contact the famed magician and escape artist.

And that, in a nutshell, is the Harry Houdini story as it is usually told. But telling stories as they are usually told is a rather boring pursuit, so we are going to take a slightly different approach to see if maybe there isn't an entirely different story hidden in the obscure details of Houdini's life—beginning with his sudden rise to fame after wallowing in obscurity for years. As noted by Kalush and Sloman, "The young Houdini... couldn't make enough money to succeed at magic. Hungry and crestfallen, he was ready to give up his dream, until he walked into a Chicago police station and met a detective who would change his life. Immediately after this fateful encounter, his picture graced the front page of a Chicago newspaper. That picture catapulted him to renown." Within months, Houdini was arguably the most famous entertainer in the country.

The detective with whom he had that fateful encounter was John Wilkie, a major player in the formation of the International Association of Police Chiefs, which was founded in Chicago in 1893, at the outset of what has been dubbed the Decade of Regicide (which set the stage for WWI). Wilkie also had a hand in the formation of the ominously titled National Bureau of Identification, and he ultimately became the chief of the US Secret Service, America's premier intelligence operation during that era. It should probably be noted here that one of Houdini's nephews, Louis Kraus, worked for the Treasury Department, overseer of Wilkie's Secret Service.

Authors Kalush and Sloman are of the opinion that, "It was forward-thinking for the chief of America's only intelligence operation to be using entertainers for covert activities in 1898." Maybe so, but the authors duly note that such actions were not unprecedented; nearly four decades earlier, Abraham Lincoln had recruited an eighteen-year-old magician named Horatio G. Cooke to serve as a Civil War spy. Lincoln and Cooke were close enough that he was reportedly present at the

president's deathbed. Later, near the end of his life, Cooke became a close friend of Harry Houdini. An entertainer of a different variety, stage actor John Wilkes Booth, also appears to have served as an intelligence operative during the Civil War.

There are indications that the practice of using entertainers to carry out covert operations dates back to well before the 1860s. If researchers Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman are to be believed, the most acclaimed entertainment figure of all time, poet/actor/playwright William Shakespeare, was part of a spy ring serving under Sir Francis Walsingham, head of the Elizabethan Secret Service. So too were Christopher Marlowe and various other of Shakespeare's contemporaries. As Phillips and Keatman point out, spymaster Walsingham chose "the best possible recruits—poets and dramatists, whose lifestyles were ideally suited to his purpose. They had the perfect cover, travelling widely and receiving welcome everywhere, and since many were also actors, role playing was often second nature... many knew foreign languages. Furthermore, as the usual social barriers were often dropped for poets, they were equally at home in back street pubs or in the palaces of the mighty. They were thus in the privileged position of having their eyes and ears everywhere."

It appears then that the practice of utilizing entertainers for covert operations didn't begin with Wilkie, who was himself a magician and a disciple of escape artist R.G. Herrmann. In addition to Houdini, Wilkie recruited other magicians as well, including Herrmann, Louis Leon, and heavyweight prizefighter/magician Bob Fitzsimmons. In addition to Wilkie, another of Houdini's covert backers was Senator Chauncey Depew, an uncle of magician Ganson Depew and a former mentor to then-Vice President Theodore Roosevelt (who would be catapulted into the presidency by the assassination of William McKinley, one of the final victims of the Decade of Regicide). Houdini soon gained another hidden backer—William Melville, the head of Scotland Yard's Special Branch and the most visible law enforcement official in the UK. Melville would ultimately become the first chief of Britain's MI5, assuming essentially the same position filled more than three centuries earlier by Walsingham. As Kalush and Sloman discovered, "Within days of arriving in England, Houdini met with a prominent Scotland Yard inspector and once again, his career took off." That inspector was Melville, whom Houdini secretly

met with on June 14, 1900, five days after arriving on England's shores. He had left the US on May 30 using a passport issued just two days earlier—a passport that contained more than its fair share of anomalies.

The document listed Houdini's birthday as April 6, though his actual birthday is said to be March 24. It claimed that he was born in 1873, making him one year older than he actually was. Most curiously of all, the document indicated that Houdini was a native-born citizen, though he most assuredly was not. For reasons that no one seems able to explain, he had been allowed to surrender his previous passport, issued to a naturalized citizen, in exchange for the officially issued but clearly fraudulent passport that he used to tour Europe.

Given his background as both a magician and a Mason (by his own account), it goes without saying that secrecy, deception, and illusion were second-nature to Houdini. He also, as Sloman and Kalush noted, had the unusual "ability to interact with a country's police officials and do demonstrations inside their jails," and he was known to be rather proficient at the art of breaking-and-entering. Needless to say, these abilities would have served Houdini well in the world of espionage. So too would many of the devices he boasted of inventing. Again according to Kalush and Sloman, Houdini "told the *New York Herald* that he invented rubber heels and cameras that work only once. The *Boston Transcript* reported that he invented 'an envelope which cannot be unsealed by steam without bringing to light the word 'opened' and a wash which will remove printer's ink from paper'... In his own *Conjurer's Monthly*, he touted the use of chloride of cobalt for sending invisible messages."

A friend of Houdini's, fellow magician Billy Robinson, was also well-versed in the tradecraft of the intelligence community. In his book *Spirit Slate Writing and Kindred Phenomena*, Robinson "detailed thirty-seven methods for secret writing [which] would play an important part in spy communication during World War I." He also "detailed how to read other people's letters without opening the envelopes by using alcohol to render them temporarily transparent," and offered readers "subtle methods to share information while being closely scrutinized." Kalush and Sloman share what became of Robinson not long after penning the book: "Then, virtually overnight, he changed his name and appearance, left the country, and broke many of his connections. Years later, his only brother wouldn't even be able to find him." Robinson died in 1918

while performing a bullet catch trick that he had performed many times before. Houdini would write that “it seems as if there were something peculiar [sic] about the whole affair.”

In addition to possessing skills and knowledge that were ideally suited to the spook trade, Houdini also ran what could best be described as his own personal spy ring; in addition to an unknown number of fulltime confederates (mostly young women, including one of his nieces), “Houdini employed female operatives on an *ad hoc* basis when he came to town.” Probably the most important of his operatives was a young fellow magician named Amedeo Vacca, whose relationship with Houdini was unknown to virtually everyone throughout the escape artist’s life. So secret was the close relationship between the two that even Harry’s wife, as well as his brother, magician/confederate Hardeen, were unaware of it.

Houdini was a man for whom secrecy seems to have been something of an obsession. His home was said to be laced with secret passageways and hidden rooms, and his desk contained hidden compartments. There are indications that, while on the road, he would frequently maintain, for unknown purposes, a second hotel room in a different hotel. A man named Edward Saint (aka Charles David Myers), who was close to Bess, once claimed that Houdini “had safes and vaults in his home, and vaults in banks that his lawyers had access to; but one secret, now made public for the first time, is the fact that Houdini had one safety deposit vault in a bank or trust company in the East under some familiar name other than Houdini, and of which the secret location rested only in Houdini’s brain. In this vault was kept highly secret papers.” As far as is known, no one—not even Geraldo Rivera—has located that secret vault.

With his espionage tradecraft and dubious passport in tow, Houdini traveled to Germany in September 1900 after taking the British Isles by storm. As was the case in England and Scotland, the press immediately showered the visiting entertainer with accolades. There was one key difference in the German press coverage though: “The newspaper accounts of Houdini’s demonstrations at German police stations portray him as a police consultant rather than a mere entertainer... For a vaudeville performer, Houdini seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time and have unprecedented access at the Berlin police station.”

As he had in the US and the British Isles, Houdini established some unusual connections in Germany for a stage performer. One associate

of his in Germany was a chemist named Hans Goldschmidt, who had patented an incendiary compound known as thermite. “Houdini noted that he was in Berlin when Goldschmidt performed his first test on a safe. He didn’t explain why a stage escape artist would be at such a demonstration.”

Houdini continued his pre-WWI tour by visiting France and Russia. Curiously, the countries that Houdini visited on his unusual tour—Russia, Germany, France and England—would have the distinction of being the major players in the soon-to-unfold Great War, but that’s probably just a bizarre coincidence. In Czarist Russia, “the magician had official permission to appear in any city in Russia, an extraordinary set of circumstances that bespeaks the close relationship between Superintendent Melville and the Okhrana, the imperial Russian secret police.” Houdini’s Russian tour was booked by a guy named Harry Day, “a mysterious expatriate American who changed his name and met Houdini in London around the same time as Houdini’s first meeting with Melville... [Day] eventually became a member of Parliament and did overseas espionage for the British government.” For many years thereafter, the shadowy Day would handle Houdini’s European bookings.

Following his lengthy tour of prewar Europe, Houdini returned to America with much press fanfare. One of his most high-profile stunts upon his return was escaping from the heavily fortified Cell #2 at the United States Jail in Washington, DC—the cell that had famously housed Charles Julius Guiteau, convicted assassin of President James Garfield, prior to Guiteau’s hanging at the facility. Guiteau, who, like his father, was closely affiliated with a religious cult known as the Oneida Community, shot Garfield on July 2, 1881, having learned how to use a handgun just a few weeks earlier. He claimed to be acting on orders from God.

Houdini, needless to say, succeeded in escaping from Guiteau’s former cell—and also rearranged all the prisoners residing on the jail’s fabled ‘murderer’s row.’ To do so, of course, he would have needed a master key, which someone clearly provided to him. But why? Such were the perks provided an entertainer who appeared to be “working as an agent for US government agencies, international police associations, and a special branch of Scotland Yard.”

A couple years after his escape from the US Jail, there was an unusual incident at the Houdini household. On October 25, 1907, an in-

truder made a concerted effort to kill the performer, slashing at the sleeping figure more than 100 times with a razor. Harry Houdini, however, was not home at the time. Had he been, there might have been a different outcome, given that some reports contend that the escape artist carried a handgun at all times. The victim of the attack instead was his brother Leopold, who closely resembled Harry. Household servant Frank Thomas was arrested and charged with the attack, though there was scant evidence linking him to the crime and no known motive. Indeed, Thomas had arrived the next morning for work seemingly unaware the attack had taken place. Remarkably, Houdini was able to keep his name out of all press accounts of the crime and trial despite the fact that the attack occurred at his home, he appears to have been the intended victim, and the alleged assailant was his own servant.

On November 26, 1909, Houdini became the first man to successfully fly a powered craft on the Australian continent. He cheerfully dispatched publicity photos featuring him in a plane surrounded by German soldiers—a move he would soon regret when those German soldiers found themselves on the opposite side of the battlefields of WWI (following America's entry into the war, Houdini would attempt to destroy all photographs documenting his training of German pilots). That first flight and all subsequent Australian flights were arranged by Lieutenant George Taylor of the Australian Intelligence Corps. Curiously, despite Houdini's avid early interest in aviation, he did not, as far as is known, ever fly again after leaving Australia.

On April 29, 1911, Houdini debuted his famed Chinese Water Torture Cell escape in Southampton, England, though he had perfected and copyrighted the act well over a year earlier. The inherently dangerous stunt caused quite a sensation: "Just the sight of the apparatus was enough to give you shivers and make you believe, as one critic noted, that you were about to witness a ritual sacrifice." Around that same time, Houdini was, for reasons unknown, busily buying mothballed electric chairs at auctions across the country.

In 1913, Houdini's beloved mother passed away, which apparently resulted in Harry learning some deep family secret. Following her death, Houdini sent the following cryptic note to one of his brothers: "Time heals all wounds, but a long time will have to pass before it will heal the terrible blow which Mother tried to save me from knowing." The mean-

ing of this rather provocative note remains a mystery. Houdini, by the way, was in Denmark when his mother died and he requested a delay of her funeral to allow himself time to return to the States. Despite strict prohibitions in Jewish law, the entertainer's request was granted.

In December 1914, just a few months after the provocation that allegedly triggered WWI, Houdini was summoned to the nation's capitol for a private audience with then-President Woodrow Wilson. It is anyone's guess what business the two men discussed but it probably had little to do with stage tricks. A year-and-a-half later, on that most notorious of dates, April 20, an estimated 100,000 people gathered in Washington, DC to watch Houdini perform a straightjacket escape. Other than for a presidential inauguration, it was said to be the largest crowd ever assembled in downtown Washington. One year later, in April 1917, the US declared war on Germany.

For the duration of the United States' involvement in the war, Houdini spent a considerable amount of time aiding the war effort, both through fundraising and by frequently visiting the front lines, where he ostensibly went from camp to camp providing entertainment for the troops. Houdini's Hollywood career also began just as the US was entering the war. It has often been said that one of his first credits was as a special-effects consultant on the *Mysteries of Myra* cliffhanger serial, though others have claimed that Houdini had no involvement in the production. Curiously, the real consultant for the project is said to have been occultist/intelligence asset Aleister Crowley.

Houdini's first feature-length film, *The Grim Game*, opened to rave reviews. Ensnared in Hollywood, Houdini quickly made friends with mega-stars Charlie Chaplin and Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, both of whom would soon be caught up in scandals—a career-ending one in Arbuckle's case. The fledgling actor next began work on *Terror Island*, filmed largely on Catalina Island. Unlike his feature debut, *Island* opened to poor reviews, leading a discouraged Houdini to launch his own production company to create his own starring vehicles.

Just after completing *Terror Island*, in December 1919, Houdini was involved in yet another bizarre incident. Having injured his ankle performing the water torture escape, he paid a visit to a doctor who examined the performer and pronounced him in imminent "danger of death." Houdini nevertheless lived on for several more years; the doc-

tor, meanwhile, turned up dead within two weeks.

By the end of 1921, the Houdini Picture Corporation had two feature-length films in the can—*The Man From Beyond* and *Haldane of the Secret Service*. The first, co-written by Houdini himself and released on April 2, 1922, featured a strange plotline revolving around a man found frozen in arctic ice and brought back to life, a case of mistaken identity, confinement in a mental institution, escape from that same institution, and an abduction. *Haldane*, released the following year, was Houdini's first attempt at directing himself. It featured the magician as his real-life alter ego, but its performance at the box office signaled the end of Houdini's film career.

For the rest of his years, Houdini devoted a considerable amount of time to investigating and debunking the spiritualist movement, which flourished in the post-WWI years as legions of fake 'mediums' preyed upon the grief of those who had lost loved ones in the war. By design or otherwise, Houdini's crusade served primarily to publicize the movement, which included among its members a number of Harry's friends, most notably and prominently Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of fictional detective Sherlock Holmes and possible perpetrator of the infamous Piltdown Hoax of 1912. Both Doyle and Houdini also had connections to Le Roi and Margery Crandon, and that is where this story takes a decidedly dark turn.

Margery, born Mina Stinson in Canada in 1888, had moved with her family to Boston, Massachusetts, at a young age. As a teenager, she is said to have been a musical prodigy and to have played various musical instruments in local orchestras, while later working as an actress, secretary and ambulance driver. In 1917, the then-married Mina was hospitalized and operated on by Dr. Le Roi Goddard Crandon, a man who occupied a prestigious position in Boston society. Crandon was a direct descendent of one of the original twenty-three Mayflower passengers and a member of the Boston Yacht Club. He had graduated from Harvard Medical School and had also obtained a master's degree in philosophy from Harvard, where he also served as an instructor. Just before meeting Mina, he had served as a Naval officer and as head of the surgical staff at a US Naval hospital during WWI.

Shortly after meeting the doctor, Mina divorced her first husband and, in 1918, became the much older Le Roi Crandon's third wife. The

two seemed hopelessly mismatched, she being young, vivacious and, by all accounts, very attractive, while he was said to be rather arrogant, unpleasant and antisocial. Nevertheless, the pair quickly became the talk of Boston's high society, particularly after the summer of 1923 when they began holding regular séances in their home. One member of the couple's inner circle was a fellow by the name of Joseph DeWyckoff, a wealthy steel tycoon born in Poland and educated in England and Czarist Russia before settling in America to practice law. He was jailed in Boston on embezzlement charges, later fleeing to Chicago after embezzling yet more money. He soon turned up in, of all places, Havana, Cuba, where, according to Kalush and Sloman, "in 1898 he was recruited by John Wilkie, the Secret Service chief, as a co-optee and was involved in spying for the United States during the Spanish-American War."

That would be, needless to say, the very same John Wilkie who had kick-started Harry Houdini's career that very same year. As a reward for his service, DeWyckoff, who "had a history of violence," "was given the contract to salvage the Battleship Maine in the Havana Harbor." The Maine had been sunk in what appears to have been a false-flag operation carried out by US intelligence operatives to justify launching a bloody colonial war.

Although fragmentary, there is clear evidence that Le Roi and Mina Crandon, in conjunction with DeWyckoff and various others, began sometime soon after getting married to 'adopt' an untold number of children who subsequently went missing. A number of letters that Dr. Crandon penned on the subject and dispatched to his buddy Doyle appear to have gone missing as well. As Kalush and Sloman note, "Strangely, many of the letters regarding the investigation into the boys have been expunged from Crandon's files." In one surviving letter, sent on August 4, 1925, Crandon notes that "about December first I had Mr. DeWyckoff bring over a boy from a London home for possible adoption... In April 1925, our Secret Service Department at Washington received a letter saying that I had first and last sixteen boys in my house for ostensible adoption, and that they had all disappeared."

Four years earlier, a Boston newspaper had reported that two boys had been rescued from a raft; one, eight-year-old John Crandon, was Margery/Mina's son from her previous marriage; the other, a ten-year-

old English 'adoptee,' was reportedly so unhappy at the Crandon home that he was frantically attempting an escape, with the younger boy in tow. "Two years later, when Margery began her mediumship, there was no trace of that boy in the household." Perhaps he was the 'homeless' boy whose dead body was reportedly found on the outskirts of Joseph DeWyckoff's large estate in Ramsey, New Jersey, during that time period.

By 1924, Dr. Crandon was openly asking his many friends in the British spiritualist movement to "be on the lookout for suitable boys to adopt." Around that same time, as another associate noted in a letter, Crandon was "being sued for \$40,000 for operating on a woman for cancer, when she was simply pregnant, and destroying the foetus... A highly incredible story which persists is that a boy who was in his family some weeks mysteriously disappeared. He claims that the boy is now in his home in England, but still official letters of inquiry and demand are received from that country. This is no mere rumor, for I was shown some of the original letters... The matter has been going on for more than a year. It is very mysterious."

In response to questions raised about the disappearance of one particular boy, Margery/Mina complained that "people wrote asking his whereabouts, and the prime minister of England cabled to ask where he was and demanded a cable reply. Why people even said Dr. Crandon committed illegal operations on little children and murdered them." According to Margery, "the poor little fellow had adenoids and had to be circumcised," so Crandon opted to perform the surgery at home. It was widely rumored that the good doctor had performed another procedure at home as well—surgically altering his wife's vaginal opening to allow her to 'magically' produce various items at séances.

On one occasion, Margery opened a closet in her home and showed an associate a collection of photos of well over 100 children, "most of them really lovely." Margery told the woman that, "Those are Dr. Crandon's caesareans—aren't they sweet? All caesareans." Given that Crandon wasn't known for delivering babies at all, the notion that he had delivered over 100 of them via caesarean was an absurdity. Who then were all these children and why had Dr. Crandon photographed them? Such are the questions raised by the fragmentary evidence trail indicating that an untold number of young boys fell into the nefarious hands of a cabal of wealthy individuals with connections to the intelligence com-

munity. Not to worry though—the disappearances were investigated by John Wilkie’s Secret Service and a British MP by the name of Harry Day.

Not long before his death, Houdini, who had an extensive library of literature on the occult, began working with horror writer and occultist H.P. Lovecraft on various magazine articles. In 1926, he hired Lovecraft (who could, like Crandon, trace his lineage to the Massachusetts Bay Colony) and Clifford Eddy, Jr. (another occultist and horror writer and one of Houdini’s covert operatives), to co-write a book debunking superstition. According to Kalush and Sloman, “Shortly after meeting with Eddy and Lovecraft, Bess was stricken with a nonspecific form of poisoning.” Indeed, there is evidence suggesting that both Harry and Bess Houdini suffered from some form of poisoning prior to Harry’s death. In addition, Houdini is said to have exhibited severe mood swings and had some “aggressive confrontations” in the weeks leading up to his death, both of which were out of character for the illusionist (though Bess is widely reported to have suffered from extreme mood swings throughout her life).

As the story goes, Houdini, who prided himself on being able to take a punch from pretty much anyone, was sucker-punched in his dressing room by a McGill University student, causing his appendix to burst and ultimately leading to his death on October 31, 1926. Houdini’s physicians dutifully swore out affidavits certifying the cause of death to be “traumatic appendicitis,” though the medical community now acknowledges that such a medical condition has never existed. No autopsy was performed. Joscelyn Gordon Whitehead, the guy credited with sucker-punching Houdini, had some rather provocative connections. His father, for example, was a British diplomat serving in the Orient. After Houdini’s death, Whitehead is said to have become a recluse living something of a hermetic existence. He did have at least one close associate though—Lady Beatrice Isabel Marler, a wealthy heiress and the wife of Sir Herbert Meredith Marler, a prominent Canadian politician and diplomat who once served as Canada’s ambassador to the US.

The mid-1920s were not a good time for the Houdini/Weiss brothers. Brother Gottfried Weiss, born two years before Harry, died in 1925. Harry followed suit the next year. Brother Nathan Weiss, born four years before Harry, died soon after, in 1927. On June 22, 1927, Houdini’s European booking agent, Harry Day, reported that his apartment had

been ransacked. That day would have also been Houdini's wedding anniversary—assuming, that is, that Harry was actually legally married to Bess, which may not have been the case. Two months after the break-in at Day's apartment, Theodore 'Hardeen,' one of Houdini's two surviving brothers—the one who had inherited all of brother Harry's props, effects and papers—reported that his home had also been broken into while he had been on the road.

After Houdini's death, it was widely rumored that Bess—who in addition to suffering from wild mood swings was also an alcoholic and a drug addict who was occasionally suicidal—ran an illegal speakeasy/brothel in conjunction with a woman named Daisy White, said to have been Harry's mistress. Nothing unusual about that.

In mid-1945, Theodore 'Hardeen' checked into Doctor's Hospital for a scheduled operation. On June 12, 1945, Hardeen left that hospital in a body bag. It was reported at the time that Hardeen had been planning to pen a book on his brother and had begun work on the project before checking into the hospital. Nearly two decades later, on October 6, 1962, Leopold Weiss—Harry's last living sibling and the one who had been brutally attacked in his brother's home—is said to have jumped off a ledge and fallen six stories to his death. The last of Houdini's secrets went to the grave with him.

It has often been noted that Houdini took far longer to perform many of his stage escapes than was actually necessary and that he was frequently out of view of the audience during such times. This has generally been assumed to have been for dramatic effect. Authors Kalush and Sloman though offer a far more compelling possibility: "One explanation is that such challenges gave Houdini both the opportunity and an alibi to conduct a mission while he was performing." It was, in other words, the perfect cover, for how could a man be responsible for something that occurred elsewhere when he was performing on stage for a captive audience at the time? There are, it should be noted, clear parallels here to the story told by Chuck Barris, who has claimed that he was similarly slipping off to conduct covert missions while performing his duties as a chaperone for *The Dating Game*.

Of course, no one took Barris seriously because we all know that such things don't really happen in the real world—or at least not in the world that most of us think we live in.

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As noted earlier in this series, there is considerable debate over the question of whether Harry Houdini ever lived in the Laurel Canyon home known locally as the “Houdini House” (the History Channel’s Brad Meltzer’s *Decoded* recently aired an episode on Houdini that included a segment filmed at the site, which was unreservedly identified as the former Houdini estate; the series, however, doesn’t appear to be overly concerned with accuracy).

Even if Houdini did live in the home that now lies in ruins, his story would seem to have little relevance here. After all, Harry Houdini, widely considered to be the consummate entertainer of his era, reached the peak of his career long before there was a Laurel Canyon – before there was even that magical place known as Hollywood. What then is there to gain through an examination of the life of Harry Houdini? Quite a bit, as it turns out.

What are generally claimed to be the basic details of Harry Houdini’s life can be found in countless published biographies and web posts. Born Erik Weisz in Budapest, Hungary on March 24, 1874, he was the fourth of seven children born to Rabbi Mayer Samuel Weisz and the former Cecelia Steiner. The family later changed the spelling of their names and Houdini became Ehrich Weiss, known by friends and family as “Ehrie,” which ultimately became “Harry.” His stage surname was an homage to famed French magician Robert Houdin.

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In 1893, he met singer/dancer Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner, known as “Bess,” who would become both his wife and lifetime stage assistant. The pair though, performing as “The Houdinis,” continued to find success an elusive goal.

To say that Houdini’s fortunes changed in 1899 would be a bit of an understatement. As recounted by Kalush and Sloman, “Within months, he had gone from cheap beer halls and dime museums to the big-time – vaudeville. In one year’s time, he had gone from literally eating rabbits for survival to making what today would equal \$45,000 a week.” After finally hitting it big, however, Houdini then did something rather inexplicable – he abruptly sailed off to England to begin a lengthy European tour.

Kalush and Sloman pose the obvious question: “Why would someone who had finally made it big risk everything and leave behind lucrative contracts to go to England with no real prospects in sight?” Why indeed? Such a move in those days would normally be an act of career suicide, but things worked out a little differently for Houdini; everywhere he went – first in England and then in Scotland, Holland, Germany, France and Russia – he was lauded by the press and quickly catapulted into the national limelight.

After a four-year absence, Houdini returned to the U.S. in 1904 and resumed his lucrative career. For many years, he was the highest-paid performer on the vaudeville circuit and he

would frequently perform publicly to huge crowds in stunts that were sometimes arranged with corporate sponsors to promote their businesses. In 1912, he introduced what would become his most famed escape act, the Chinese Water Torture Cell.

In 1918, Houdini decided to try his luck with the fledgling new entertainment medium known as motion pictures, starring first in a multi-part serial and then in *The Grim Game* (1919) and *Terror Island* (1920). It was during this time that he is said to have taken up residence in Laurel Canyon, at the corner of Laurel Canyon Boulevard and Lookout Mountain Avenue. Following that, he moved to New York and started up his own production company, the Houdini Picture Corporation, which released *The Man From Beyond* (1921) and *Haldane of the Secret Service* (1923), after which Houdini gave up his less-than-successful film career.

For the last few years leading up to his death on October 31, 1926, Houdini primarily focused on debunking psychics and mediums, leading some to speculate that the spiritualist movement may have been behind his untimely demise. To this day, séances are regularly held around the world in attempts to contact the famed magician and escape artist.

And that, in a nutshell, is the Harry Houdini story as it is usually told. But telling stories as they are usually told is a rather boring pursuit, so we are, shockingly enough, going to take a slightly different approach to see if maybe there isn't an entirely different story hidden in the obscure details of Houdini's life, beginning with his sudden rise to fame after wallowing in obscurity for years.

As noted by Kalush and Sloman, "The young Houdini ... couldn't make enough money to succeed at magic. Hungry and crestfallen, he was ready to give up his dream, until he walked into a Chicago police station and met a detective who would change his life. Immediately after this fateful encounter, his picture graced the front page of a Chicago newspaper. That picture catapulted him to renown." Within months, Houdini was arguably the most famed entertainer in the country.

That detective was John Wilkie, a major player in the formation of the International Association of Police Chiefs (founded in Chicago in 1893, at the outset of what has been dubbed the Decade of Regicide, which set the stage for World War I) and the ominously titled National Bureau of Identification, and ultimately the chief of the U.S. Secret Service, America's premier intelligence operation during that era. It should probably be noted here that one of Houdini's nephews, Louis Kraus, worked for the Treasury Department, overseer of Wilkie's Secret Service.

Authors Kalush and Sloman are of the opinion that, "It was forward-thinking for the chief of America's only intelligence operation to be using entertainers for covert activities in 1898." Maybe so, but the authors duly note that such actions were not unprecedented; nearly four decades earlier, Abraham Lincoln had recruited an eighteen-year-old magician named Horatio G. Cooke to serve as a Civil War spy. Lincoln and Cooke were close enough that he was reportedly present at the president's deathbed. Later, near the end of his life, Cooke became a close friend of Harry Houdini.

It could also be noted that an entertainer of a different variety, stage actor John Wilkes Booth, also appears to have served as an intelligence operative during the Civil War, so the practice of utilizing entertainers for covert operations clearly didn't begin with Wilkie, who was himself a magician and a disciple of escape artist R. G. Herrmann. In addition to Houdini, Wilkie recruited other magicians as well, including Herrmann, Louis Leon, and heavyweight

prizefighter/magician Bob Fitzsimmons.

Another of Houdini's covert backers was Senator Chauncey Depew, an uncle of magician Ganson Depew and a former mentor to then-Vice-President Theodore Roosevelt (who would soon be catapulted into the presidency by the assassination of William McKinley, one of the final victims of the Decade of Regicide). Houdini would soon gain another hidden backer – William Melville, head of Scotland Yard's Special Branch and the most visible law enforcement official in the UK. Melville would ultimately become the first chief of Britain's MI-5.

As Kalush and Sloman discovered, "Within days of arriving in England, Houdini met with a prominent Scotland Yard inspector and once again, his career took off." That inspector, of course, was Melville, whom Houdini secretly met with on June 14, 1900, five days after arriving on England's shores. He had left the U.S. on May 30 using a passport issued just two days earlier – a passport that contained more than its fair share of anomalies.

The document listed his birthday as April 6, though his actual birthday is said to be March 24. It claimed that he was born in 1873, making him one year older than he actually was. Most curiously of all, the document indicated that Houdini was a native born citizen, though he most assuredly was not. He had been allowed to surrender his previous passport, issued to a naturalized citizen, in exchange for the officially-issued but clearly fraudulent passport that he used to tour Europe.

Given his background as both a magician and a Mason (by his own account), it goes without saying that secrecy, deception, and illusion were second-nature to Houdini. He also, as Sloman and Kalush noted, had the unusual "ability to interact with a country's police officials and do demonstrations inside their jails," and he was known to be rather proficient at the art of breaking-and-entering. Needless to say, these abilities would have served Houdini well in the world of espionage.

So too would many of the devices he boasted of inventing. According to Kalush and Sloman, "[Houdini] told the New York Herald that he invented rubber heels and cameras that work only once. The Boston Transcript reported that he invented 'an envelope which cannot be unsealed by steam without bringing to light the word 'opened' and a wash which will remove printer's ink from paper' ... In his own Conjuror's Monthly, he touted the use of chloride of cobalt for sending invisible messages."

A friend of Houdini's, fellow magician Billy Robinson, was also well-versed in the tradecraft of the intelligence community. In his book *Spirit Slate Writing and Kindred Phenomena*, Robinson "detailed thirty-seven methods for secret writing [which] would play an important part in spy communication during World War I." He also "detailed how to read other people's letters without opening the envelopes by using alcohol to render them temporarily transparent," and offered readers "subtle methods to share information while being closely scrutinized."

Kalush and Sloman share what became of Robinson not long after penning the book: "Then, virtually overnight, he changed his name and appearance, left the country, and broke many of his connections. Years later, his only brother wouldn't even be able to find him." Robinson died in 1918 while performing a bullet catch trick that he had performed many times before. Houdini would write that "it seems as if there were something peculiar [sic] about the whole affair."

In addition to possessing skills and knowledge that were ideally suited to the spook trade, Houdini also ran what could best be described as his own personal spy ring. In addition to an unknown number of fulltime confederates (mostly young women, including one of his nieces), “Houdini employed female operatives on an ad hoc basis when he came to town.” Probably the most important of these operatives was a young fellow magician named Amedeo Vacca, whose relationship with Houdini was unknown to virtually everyone throughout the escape artist’s life. So secret was the close relationship between the two that even Harry’s wife and brother, magician/confederate Hardeen, were unaware of it.

Houdini was a man for whom secrecy seems to have been something of an obsession. His home was said to be laced with secret passageways and hidden rooms, and his desk contained hidden compartments. There are indications that, while on the road, he would frequently maintain, for unknown purposes, a second hotel room in a different hotel. A man named Edward Saint (aka Charles David Myers), who was close to Bess, once claimed that Houdini “had safes and vaults in his home, and vaults in banks that his lawyers had access to; but one secret, now made public for the first time, is the fact that Houdini had one safety deposit vault in a bank or trust company in the East under some familiar name other than Houdini, and of which the secret location rested only in Houdini’s brain. In this vault was kept highly secret papers.” As far as is known, no one – not even Geraldo Rivera – has located that secret vault.

With his espionage tradecraft and dubious passport in tow, Houdini traveled to Germany in September 1900 after taking the British Isles by storm. As was the case in England and Scotland, the press immediately showered the visiting entertainer with accolades. There was one key difference in the press coverage though: “The newspaper accounts of Houdini’s demonstrations at German police stations portray him as a police consultant rather than a mere entertainer ... For a vaudeville performer, Houdini seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time and have unprecedented access at the Berlin police station.”

As he had in the US and the British Isles, Houdini established some unusual connections for a stage performer. One associate of his in Germany was a chemist named Hans Goldschmidt, who a few years earlier had patented a incendiary compound known as thermite. “Houdini noted that he was in Berlin when Goldschmidt performed his first test on a safe. He didn’t explain why a stage escape artist would be at such a demonstration.” For the record, Houdini does not appear to have been in the vicinity of the thermite demonstration given in lower Manhattan on September 11, 2001.

After performing to much acclaim in Germany, Houdini continued his pre-World War I tour by visiting France and Russia (the countries that Houdini visited on this unusual tour – Russia, Germany, France and Britain – had the curious distinction of being the major players in the soon-to-unfold Great War, but I’m sure that’s just a bizarre coincidence).

In Czarist Russia, “the magician had official permission to appear in any city in Russia, an extraordinary set of circumstances that bespeaks the close relationship between Superintendent Melville and the Okhrana, the imperial Russian secret police.” Houdini’s Russian tour was booked by a guy named Harry Day, “a mysterious expatriate American who changed his name and met Houdini in London around the same time as Houdini’s first meeting with Melville ... [Day] eventually became a member of Parliament and did overseas espionage for the British government.” For many years thereafter, the shadowy Day would handle Houdini’s European bookings.

Following the lengthy tour of pre-war Europe, Houdini returned to America with much press fanfare. One of his most high-profile stunts upon his return was escaping from the heavily fortified Cell #2 at the United States Jail in Washington, DC. The cell had famously housed Charles Julius Guiteau, convicted assassin of President James Garfield, prior to Guiteau's hanging at the facility on June 30, 1882. Guiteau, who, like his father, was closely affiliated with a religious cult known as the Oneida Community, shot Garfield on July 2, 1881, after having learned how to use a handgun just a few weeks earlier. He claimed to be acting on orders from God.

The gunshot wounds inflicted by Guiteau were not fatal. Garfield died nearly three months later, on September 19, 1881, from infections resulting from (probably deliberately) poor medical care. According to Wikipedia, "Of the four presidential assassins, Guiteau lived longer than any after his victim's death (nine months)." Given that Lee Harvey Oswald survived JFK by just two days and Leon Czolgosz survived William McKinley by just fifty-three days, this would be a true statement were it not for the fact that there is compelling evidence suggesting that John Wilkes Booth lived for several decades after the death of Abraham Lincoln. And then, of course, there is the question of whether these four men – Booth, Guiteau, Czolgosz and Oswald – were the actual presidential assassins.

But here, I suppose, I have digressed (yes, I am officially bringing that word back out of retirement).

Houdini, needless to say, succeeded in escaping from Guiteau's former cell – and also rearranged all the prisoners residing on the jail's fabled 'murderer's row.' To do so, of course, he would have needed a master key, which someone clearly provided to him. But why? Such were the perks provided an entertainer who appeared to be "working as an agent for U.S. government agencies, international police associations, and a special branch of Scotland Yard."

A couple years after his escape from the US Jail, there was a curious incident at the Houdini household. On October 25, 1907, an intruder made a concerted effort to kill the performer, slashing at the sleeping figure more than 100 times with a razor. Harry Houdini, however, was not home at the time. The victim of the attack was his brother Leopold, who closely resembled Harry. Household servant Frank Thomas was arrested and charged with the attack, though there was scant evidence linking him to the crime and no known motive. Indeed, Thomas had arrived the next morning for work seemingly unaware the attack had taken place.

Had Houdini been home at the time, there might have been a different outcome, given that some reports contend that the escape artist carried a handgun at all times. Remarkably, Houdini was able to keep his name out of all press accounts of the crime and trial despite the fact that the attack occurred at his home, he appears to have been the intended victim, and the alleged assailant was his own servant.

On November 26, 1909, Houdini became the first man to successfully fly a powered craft on the Australian continent. He cheerfully dispatched publicity photos featuring him in a plane surrounded by German soldiers – a move he would soon regret when those German soldiers found themselves on the opposite side of the battlefields of World War I. Following America's entry into the war, Houdini would attempt to destroy all photographs documenting his training of German pilots.

The magician's first flight, and all his subsequent Australian flights, were arranged by

Lieutenant George Taylor of the Australian Intelligence Corps. Curiously, despite Houdini's avid early interest in aviation, he did not, as far as is known, ever fly again after leaving Australia.

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In other news, it appears that, while Lookout Mountain Laboratory has been out of business for many years, the spirit of the clandestine film studio is still very much alive and well, as evidenced by the 'Kony 2012' video.

“Why people even said Dr. Crandon committed illegal operations on little children and murdered them.” Mina/Margery Crandon

On April 29, 1911, Houdini debuted his famed Chinese Water Torture Cell escape in Southampton, England, though he had perfected and copyrighted the act well over a year earlier. The inherently dangerous stunt caused quite a sensation: “Just the sight of the apparatus was enough to give you shivers and make you believe, as one critic noted, that you were about to witness a ritual sacrifice.”

Around that same time, Houdini was, for reasons unknown, busily buying mothballed electric chairs at auctions across the country.

In 1913, Houdini’s beloved mother passed away, which apparently resulted in Harry learning some deep family secret. Following her death, Houdini sent the following cryptic note to one of his brothers: “Time heals all wounds, but a long time will have to pass before it will heal the terrible blow which Mother tried to save me from knowing.” The meaning of this rather provocative note remains a mystery. Houdini, by the way, was in Denmark when his mother died, and he requested a delay of her funeral to allow himself time to return to the States. Despite strict prohibitions in Jewish law, the entertainer’s request was, of course, granted.

In December 1914, just a few months after the staged provocation that allegedly triggered World War I, Houdini was summoned to the nation’s capitol for a private audience with then-President Woodrow Wilson. It is anyone’s guess what business the two men discussed, but it probably had little to do with stage tricks.

A year-and-a-half later, on that most notorious of dates, April 20, an estimated 100,000 people gathered in Washington, D.C. to watch Houdini perform a straightjacket escape. Other than for a presidential inauguration, it was said to be the largest crowd ever assembled in downtown Washington. One year later, in April 1917, the US declared war on Germany.

For the duration of the United States’ involvement in the war, Houdini spent a considerable amount of time aiding the war effort, both through fundraising and by frequently visiting the front lines, where he ostensibly went from camp to camp providing entertainment for the troops.

Houdini’s Hollywood career also began just as the US was entering the war. It has often been said that one of his first credits was as a special-effects consultant on the Mysteries of Myra cliffhanger serial, though others have claimed that Houdini had no involvement in the production. Curiously, the real consultant for the project is said to have been occultist/intelligence asset Aleister Crowley.

Houdini’s first feature-length film, *The Grim Game*, opened to rave reviews. Ensnared in Hollywood, Houdini quickly made friends with mega-stars Charlie Chaplin and Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, both of whom would soon be caught up in scandals – a career-ending one in Arbuckle’s case. The fledgling actor next began work on *Terror Island*, filmed largely on Catalina Island. Unlike his feature debut, *Island* opened to poor reviews, leading a discouraged Houdini to launch his own production company to create his own starring vehicles.

Just after completing *Terror Island*, in December 1919, Houdini was involved in yet another curious incident. Having injured his ankle performing the water torture escape, he paid a visit

to a doctor who examined the performer and pronounced him in imminent “danger of death.” Houdini nevertheless lived on for several more years; the doctor, meanwhile, turned up dead within two weeks.

By the end of 1921, the Houdini Picture Corporation had two feature-length films in the can – *The Man From Beyond* and *Haldane of the Secret Service*. The first, co-written by Houdini himself and released on April 2, 1922, involved a bizarre plot revolving around a man found frozen in arctic ice and brought back to life, a case of mistaken identity, confinement in a mental institution, escape from that same institution, and an abduction. *Haldane*, released the following year, was Houdini’s first attempt at directing himself. It featured the magician as his real-life alter ego, but its performance at the box office signaled the end of Houdini’s film career.

For the rest of his years, Houdini devoted a considerable amount of time to investigating and debunking the spiritualist movement, which flourished in the post-World War I years as legions of fake ‘mediums’ preyed upon the grief of those who had lost loved one in the war, promising to reconnect them with those in the ‘spirit’ world. By design or otherwise, Houdini’s crusade served primarily to publicize the movement. Houdini’s interest in the movement was said to have been spawned by the death of his beloved mother.

Houdini had a number of friends in the spiritualist movement, most notably and prominently Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of fictional detective Sherlock Holmes and possible perpetrator of the infamous Piltdown Hoax of 1912. Both Doyle and Houdini were also had connections to Le Roi and Margery Crandon, and that is where this story takes a decidedly dark turn.

Margery, born Mina Stinson in Canada in 1888, had moved with her family to Boston, Massachusetts at a young age. As a teenager, she is said to have been a musical prodigy and to have played various musical instruments in local orchestras, and to later have worked as an actress, secretary and ambulance driver. In 1917, the then-married Mina was hospitalized and operated on by Dr. Le Roi Goddard Crandon, a man who occupied a prestigious position in Boston society.

Crandon was a direct descendent of one of the original twenty-three Mayflower passengers and a member of the Boston Yacht Club. He had graduated from Harvard Medical School and had also obtained a Master’s Degree in Philosophy from Harvard, where he also served as an instructor. Just before meeting Mina, he had served as a Naval officer and as head of the surgical staff at a US Naval hospital during WWI.

Shortly after meeting the doctor, Mina divorced her first husband and, in 1918, became the much older Le Roi Crandon’s third wife. The two seemed hopelessly mismatched, she being young, vivacious and, by all accounts, very attractive, while he was said to be rather arrogant, unpleasant and antisocial. Nevertheless, the pair quickly became the talk of Boston’s high society, particularly after the summer of 1923, when they began holding regular ‘séances’ in their home.

One regular member of the couple’s inner circle was a fellow by the name of Joseph DeWyckoff, a wealthy steel tycoon who had been born in Poland and educated in England and Czarist Russia before settling in America to practice law. He was ultimately jailed in Boston on embezzlement charges, then later fled to Chicago after embezzling yet more money. He soon turned up in, of all places, Havana, Cuba, where, according to Kalush and

Sloman, “in 1898 he was recruited by John Wilkie, the Secret Service chief, as a co-optee and was involved in spying for the United States during the Spanish-American War.”

That would be, needless to say, the very same John Wilkie who had kick-started Harry Houdini’s career that very same year. As a reward for his service, DeWyckoff, who “had a history of violence,” “was given the contract to salvage the Battleship Maine in the Havana Harbor.” The Maine had been sunk in what appears to have been a false-flag operation carried out by US intelligence operatives to justify launching a bloody colonial war.

Although fragmentary, there is clear evidence that Le Roi and Mina Crandon, in conjunction with various others (including DeWyckoff), began to ‘adopt,’ sometime soon after getting married, an untold number of children who subsequently went missing. A number of letters that Dr. Crandon penned on the subject and dispatched to his buddy Doyle appear to have gone missing as well. As Kalush and Sloman note, “Strangely, many of the letters regarding the investigation into the boys have been expunged from Crandon’s files.” As faithful readers know, there is nothing strange about that at all; it is pretty much par for the course.

In one surviving letter, sent on August 4, 1925, Crandon notes that “about December first I had Mr. DeWyckoff bring over a boy from a London home for possible adoption ... In April 1925, our Secret Service Department at Washington received a letter saying that I had first and last sixteen boys in my house for ostensible adoption, and that they had all disappeared.” Four years earlier, a Boston newspaper had reported that two boys had been rescued from a raft. One, eight-year-old John Crandon, was Margery/Mina’s son from her previous marriage. The other was a ten-year-old English ‘adoptee’ who was reportedly so unhappy at the Crandon home that he was frantically attempting an escape, with the younger boy in tow (not unlike the Steven Stayner story). “Two years later, when Margery began her mediumship, there was no trace of that boy in the household.”

Perhaps he was the ‘homeless’ boy whose dead body was reportedly found on the outskirts of Joseph DeWyckoff’s large estate in Ramsey, New Jersey during that time period.

By 1924, Dr. Crandon was openly asking his many friends in the British spiritualist movement to “be on the lookout for suitable boys to adopt.” Around that same time, as another associate noted in a letter, Crandon was “being sued for \$40,000 for operating on a woman for cancer, when she was simply pregnant, and destroying the foetus ... A highly incredible story which persists is that a boy who was in his family some weeks mysteriously disappeared. He claims that the boy is now in his home in England, but still official letters of inquiry and demand are received from that country. This is no mere rumor, for I was shown some of the original letters ... The matter has been going on for more than a year. It is very mysterious.”

In response to questions raised about the disappearance of one particular boy, Margery/Mina complained that “people wrote asking his whereabouts, and the prime minister of England cabled to ask where he was and demanded a cable reply. Why people even said Dr. Crandon committed illegal operations on little children and murdered them.” According to Margery, “the poor little fellow had adenoids and had to be circumcised,” so Crandon opted to perform the surgery at home. It was widely rumored that the good doctor had performed another procedure at home as well – surgically altering his wife’s vaginal opening to allow her to ‘magically’ produce various items at séances.

On one occasion, Margery opened a closet in her home and showed an associate a collection

of photos of well over a hundred children, “most of them really lovely.” Margery told the woman that, “Those are Dr. Crandon’s caesareans—aren’t they sweet? All caesareans.” Given that Crandon wasn’t known for delivering babies at all, the notion that he had delivered over a hundred of them via caesarean was an absurdity. Who then were all these children and what became of them?

Such is the fragmentary evidence trail indicating that an untold number of young boys fell into the nefarious hands of a cabal of wealthy individuals with connections to the intelligence community. Nearly a full century ago. Not to worry though – the disappearances were investigated by John Wilkie’s Secret Service and a British MP by the name of, uhmm, Harry Day. And I’m sure they got to the bottom of the sordid affair, just as Louis Freeh is undoubtedly now getting to the truth of the Sandusky case.

Not long before his death, Houdini, who had an extensive library of literature on the occult, began working with horror writer and racist occultist H.P. Lovecraft on various magazine articles. In 1926, he hired Lovecraft (who could, by the way, trace his lineage to the Massachusetts Bay Colony) and Clifford Eddy, Jr. (another occultist and horror writer and one of Houdini’s covert operatives), to co-write a book debunking superstition (despite the fact that wife Bess was known to harbor numerous superstitions, some of them apparently quite bizarre).

According to Kalush and Sloman, “Shortly after meeting with Eddy and Lovecraft, Bess was stricken with a nonspecific form of poisoning.” Indeed, there is evidence suggesting that both Harry and Bess Houdini suffered from some form of poisoning prior to Harry’s death. In addition, Houdini is said to have suffered from severe mood swings and to have had some “aggressive confrontations” in the weeks leading up to his death, both of which were out of character for the illusionist (though Bess is widely reported to have suffered from extreme mood swings throughout her life).

As the story goes, Houdini, who prided himself on being able to take a punch from pretty much anyone, was sucker-punched in his dressing room by a McGill University student, which caused his appendix to burst and ultimately led to his death on October 31, 1926. Houdini’s physicians dutifully swore out affidavits certifying the cause of death to be “traumatic appendicitis,” though the medical community now acknowledges that such a medical condition has never existed. No autopsy was performed.

As previously noted, the house in Laurel Canyon universally known as the ‘Houdini House’ burned to the ground exactly thirty-three years later, on October 31, 1959. Precisely fifty-two years (the magician’s age at the time of his death) after that, the Magic Castle in the Hollywood Hills exploded into flames on October 31, 2011. Built as a Victorian mansion in 1908, the converted structure opened in 1963 as the Magic Castle, a rather creepy members-only club featuring hidden rooms and secret passageways. According to reports, the only room in the building left unscathed by the fire was the Houdini Room.

The mid-1920s were not a good time for the Houdini/Weiss brothers. Brother Gottfried Weiss, born two years before Harry, died in 1925. Harry followed suit the next year. Brother Nathan Weiss, born four years before Harry, died soon after, in 1927. Shit happens, I guess.

On June 22, 1927, Houdini’s European booking agent, Harry Day, reported that his apartment had been ransacked. That day would have also been the Houdini’s wedding anniversary – assuming, that is, that Harry was actually legally married to Bess, which may not have been

the case. Two months after the break-in at Day's apartment, Theodore 'Hardeen,' who had inherited all of brother Harry's props, effects and papers, reported that his home had also been broken into while he had been on the road.

Joscelyn Gordon Whitehead, the guy credited with gut-punching Houdini, was a rather curious gent. Though a college student at the time of the incident, he was already in his thirties. His father was a British diplomat serving in the Orient. After Houdini's death, Whitehead is said to have become a recluse living something of a hermetic existence. He did have at least one close associate though – Lady Beatrice Isabel Marler, a wealthy heiress and the wife of Sir Herbert Meredith Marler, a prominent Canadian politician and diplomat who once served as Canada's ambassador to the US.

After Houdini's death, it was widely rumored that Bess – who in addition to suffering from wild mood swings was also an alcoholic and a drug addict who was occasionally suicidal – ran an illegal speakeasy/brothel in conjunction with a woman named Daisy White, who was said to have been Harry's mistress. Nothing weird about that. White was not, by the way, the only woman who claimed or was rumored to have had an affair with the performer.

In mid-1945, Theodore "Hardeen," one of Houdini's two surviving brothers and the one who had inherited all of his effects, checked into Doctor's Hospital for a scheduled operation. On June 12, 1945, Hardeen left the hospital in a box. It was reported at the time that Hardeen had been planning to pen a book on his brother and had begun work on the project before checking into the hospital.

Nearly two decades later, on October 6, 1962, Leopold Weiss – Harry's last living sibling and the one who had been brutally attacked in his brother's home – is said to have jumped off a ledge and fallen six stories to his death. The last of Houdini's secrets went to the grave with him.

* * * * *

It has often been noted that Houdini took far longer to perform many of his stage escapes than was actually necessary, and that he was frequently out of view of the audience during such times. This has generally been assumed to have been for dramatic effect. Authors Kalush and Sloman though offer a far more compelling possibility: "One explanation is that such challenges gave Houdini both the opportunity and an alibi to conduct a mission while he was performing."

It was, in other words, the perfect cover, for how could a man be responsible for something that occurred elsewhere when he was performing on stage for a captive audience at the time? There are, it should be noted, clear parallels here to the story told by Chuck Barris, who has claimed that he was similarly slipping off to conduct covert missions while performing his duties as a chaperone for the Dating Game.

Of course, no one took Barris seriously because we all know that such things don't really happen in the real world – or at least not in the world that the media present to us as the real world.

It should also be noted here that Houdini possessed, as do most magicians, seemingly superhuman abilities, such as the ability to dislocate his shoulders at will to slip out of straightjackets. He could also regulate his heart rate, respiration rate and other metabolic

functions such that he could survive for extended periods of time with little available oxygen, thus facilitating his escapes.

Such abilities are rather commonplace in the world of magic. One magician was found to be able to identify what card a person was holding by virtue of the fact that he had such extraordinary visual acuity that he could see the reflection of the card in the subject's pupils. Many magicians are able to pick up a stack of cards and know by feel exactly how many cards they are holding, and are able to distinguish individual cards by subtle thickness variations indistinguishable to people with normal abilities.

How do people gain such incredible physical abilities? Probably the best way of understanding such phenomena is as a function of trauma-based, early childhood training.

It appears then that, at the end of the day, the actors populating the Harry Houdini story are the usual cast of characters: intel operatives, Masons, pedophiles, mind-rapists, occultists, and, of course, entertainers. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

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I, for one, am pleasantly surprised to see that the hack filmmaker who subjected the world to "Kony 2012" is now appearing in some of the most entertaining videos ever to hit the web.